

USCCB Immigration Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah: Welcoming Address (excerpts)

[The address excerpted below was given at the opening of the Salt Lake City Immigration Conference (January 11, 2012) by Bishop John C. Wester, bishop of Salt Lake City and chair of the USCCB Committee on Migration and Refugee Services. The complete address can be found on the [Justice for Immigrants web site](#).]

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It seems as if time is up as well in terms of waiting for comprehensive immigration reform, at least if you believe some people in Washington. But it is the American public, including the Catholics, who will decide the final outcome. So many people—so many of you—have worked so hard these past years to achieve what seems like an elusive goal. Yet, we must never give up hope, and I fully believe that one day we will be successful. In the meantime, we must always keep focused as we advocate for immigration reform in this complex and constantly changing landscape in our country today.

This is an important time in the immigration debate in this nation. While Congress has failed to address this issue, our state legislatures and local governments are not hesitating to attempt to fill the vacuum. Instead of one consistent national policy, we are now confronted with hundreds of State and local immigration policies, the majority of which are harmful to immigrant families and communities.

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Although the moment seems dark and the prospect of comprehensive immigration reform in Congress distant, I believe that the work the church is doing on immigration on a State and local level—both in the past and in the months ahead—could make all the difference in how our nation eventually solves this problem.

Let me explain. Rather than looking at the moment as a daunting—if not impossible—challenge, we should rather look upon it as an opportunity. You may be asking yourself how fighting a record number of restrictive State immigration laws and local law enforcement initiatives could be an opportunity.

Well, it is clear that Congress will not act on this issue unless a strong national consensus emerges, where the majority of Americans agree on a path forward and communicate that to their federal, elected officials. The only way that will happen is if the American people are educated on the issues and the realities of immigration, and that can only occur if the issue is right in front of them, being debated in their local communities.

This gives us the opportunity to go to Catholics and educate them on the immigration issue, to introduce them to immigrants, and to show how life without the hard work of immigrants would affect them. We can and should take advantage of this moment to organize locally, to improve our advocacy and communication, so that we are prepared when the next chance for immigration reform happens at the federal level.

And it will, no doubt. Different laws, particularly enforcement-only initiatives, played out in fifty States are bound to fail, since they will not fix a broken federal immigration system. Immigrants, over 70 percent of whom have been here five years or longer, are not leaving; they are just hiding in fear. The American public will begin to understand that the issue must be addressed comprehensively, on a federal level, and a consensus will emerge. As Winston Churchill once said, "Americans eventually do the right thing, once they have tried everything else."

Our voice, the voice of the Catholic community, and of so many other communities as well, must be part of that consensus and help to shape it. That is why we must continue to fight the battle locally and remain a voice of faith in the debate.

We also must continue to fight because of the real suffering that is occurring in immigrant families and communities. There are four million U.S. citizen children who have one or more undocumented parents. The combination of Federal-State enforcement partnerships and federal enforcement actions has led to an unprecedented separation of families. Nearly a quarter of those deported in the last year were part of a family with a U.S.-citizen—most likely a child. They also have led to a record number of deportations over the past three years, as is evidenced by over one million persons who have been deported during that period.

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Lest there be any confusion, I think it is important to say that the Catholic Church understands and readily acknowledges the role that enforcement and the rule of law play in our system. Nonetheless, as many here in Utah and across the country might argue, we do not believe enforcement alone is the answer. Rather, it must be coupled with humane reforms in our legal immigration system that will allow immigrants to play by a fair and equitably administered set of rules. That is not the case in our current system -- only the federal government can achieve this balance.

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In his address to the New World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Immigrants in 1985, Blessed Pope John Paul II, of happy memory, stated: "Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own country. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be permitted to migrate to other countries and to take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive him of membership in the human family, nor of citizenship in the universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship..." While Catholic teaching does place limits on this right, the Holy Father clearly sees the importance of recognizing a dignity in all human beings, given to them by God himself. This means that nation states have an obligation to facilitate legal migration to the greatest extent possible in order to protect and honor human dignity. This is particularly true in our country where we have been so blessed.

What is more, we are not only called to honor our fellow human beings but to love them, as Christ himself has mandated. This is especially true of the immigrant, of those who have travelled great distances, endured countless hardships and established themselves in our society as trustworthy neighbors.

We have just concluded the Christmas season, celebrating the birth of our Lord the Savior. As an infant, He and the Holy Family fled Herod as refugees. As an adult, He was an itinerant preacher -- a migrant Himself - - with "no place to lay His Head." He taught us that in the stranger, we see Him. Do not forget that when you are witnessing before the public square on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters, you are witnessing for Him, "for whatsoever you do for the least of my brethren, you do unto Me."

God bless you.